

The Witness



by Joyce Carol Oates

edited by Raymond Souland, Jr. & Kassandra Souland

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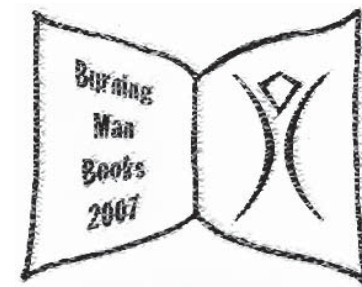
P O R T L A N D , O R E G O N



S C R I P T O R P R E S S

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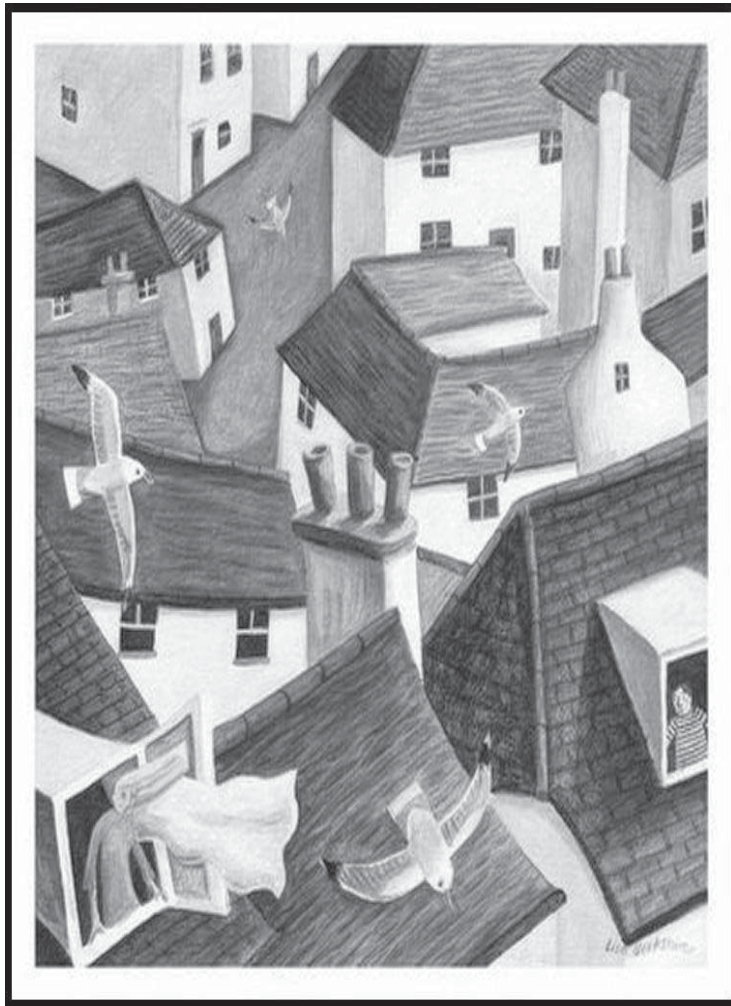
Number Fifty

The Witness, 1984
by Joyce Carol Oates

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*When you were young,
and there seemed no doors to daylight . . .*



My father lies on top of the bedspread, the pillows propped up crooked behind him, the seashell ashtray on his chest, smoking, leafing through the Bible, staring smiling out the window. “The Holy Ghost has departed me,” he sometimes says. I am running light as air across the roofs on Main Street. Threading my way through the flapping laundry, around the television antennae. One of the neighbor women calls out to me. Be careful, you’re going to trip yourself and fall, you’re going to *hurt yourself*, but already I’m a mile away, five miles away, running so lightly I only need to come to earth to bounce up again, springy, my toes like a monkey’s toes, my hair flying.

You don’t know what you’re saying, my mother tells me. Her eyes are puffy from crying. Her lips look chapped—all the lipstick has been wiped off. You’re dreaming with your eyes open: you’re a liar.

I was running away from home but not for the first time. I had taken \$3.87 from the secret place in my mother’s stockings-and-underwear drawer in the bureau. Beneath the sheet of old Christmas wrapping paper. I was running, flying, galloping. No one could catch me. No one saw me. Mrs. Howard hanging her laundry, old sour-breathed Mr. Ledbetter on the first floor landing, Whoa, horsey! Where are you going so fast? Do you live in this building?

Why do they always talk in loud joking voices. And make swipes at my hair because of the curls. But I have learned to duck and keep on running. . . .

You tell such lies, my sister Irene says. But of course she’s jealous.

It is many years ago, too many to calculate. Below Waterman Park where you’re not supposed to go alone the man with the coat slung over his shoulder is speaking softly and angrily to the woman in the peasant blouse, but I can’t hear, I have pressed the palms of my hands against my ears. I am not to blame, I am only eleven years old.

It is the last summer we will be living above Harders Shoes on Main Street, Main Street at the corner of Mohigan, a few weeks before the fire, before everything is changed. “What is going to happen?” my mother’s sister from Trenton asked. “He isn’t dangerous, is he?—I mean, you or the girls—” My mother didn’t answer at first. Maybe she knew I was listening behind the door. Then she made a sound I couldn’t decipher,

a laugh, a thin tired snorting kind of laugh. She said: “Not the girls, he’s crazy about the girls.”

I am running away from them, from the apartment on Main Street. Irene and me sharing a bed, Momma on the sofa in the living room, my father in the “large” bedroom. Was he dangerous? No. Yes maybe. Of course not. Sometimes love for us brimmed in his eyes. Sometimes he had to wipe at his eyes, ashamed, with the back of his hand.

I am running away to Waterman Park. My father shuffles the cards for a game of gin rummy, then changes his mind, lets the cards fall onto the floor, a cascade like water falling, with almost no sound. He isn’t drunk but he isn’t friendly right now. His feet are bare and bluish-white and the nail of the big toe on the injured foot is that queer plum color, and grown very thick: maybe a quarter-inch thick.

He reaches for the Bible, he reaches for a fresh pack of cigarettes.

He says: “Get out of here. Shut the door. I’ve had enough of you spying on me—all of you.” His voice is low and murmuring, he doesn’t sound angry. He never does.

It is an afternoon in late August. Warm muggy motionless air. I am running up the dim-lit stairs to the room, the three bills and the coins are in my pocket, no one will know where I’ve gone. My mother is at work, my sister is at a friend’s house, my father is lying on top of the bedspread, smiling, not smiling, staring out the window. The bedspread is scorched in several places from his cigarettes.

I slam outside, letting the door strike against the asphalt siding, not taking time to close it. The tarry roof is quivering with heat. It is our last summer. The four-room apartment above the shoe store. The sandstone building. Main Street at Mohigan. Momma worked days at the hospital out East End Avenue, Irene was fourteen and in tenth grade at the high school. My father went out sometimes in the evening. Then he wouldn’t come home until two or three in the morning, or much later, eight o’clock, but we wouldn’t see him, he’d go into the bathroom and lock the door. But most of the time he didn’t go out. They were quarreling once and I overheard my mother say, Why don’t you leave, then, go back to Isle Royale and live alone the rest of your life—go to Alaska for Christ’s sake, and my father said without raising his voice:

Where? Where can I go? I’m here. I’m in my skin. Here. This is it.

He is lying against the crooked pillows, there are tufts of dark hair on the joints of his toes, the air in the bedroom is stale and smells of tobacco smoke, whisky, sweat, unwashed clothes. The last time it rained, my father didn’t close the window, so the mattress got soaked and the wallpaper got stained but the air was fresh. What does it mean, stupid Irene asked, —the Holy Ghost “departed”? What does it mean? Is it something like God, or Jesus Christ—? Will we be all right?

I am running across the roof of our building. Running, flying, my arms outstretched. No one can catch me. No one can see me. A woman is hanging up laundry in the heat, clothespins and nylon cord and a wicker basket filled with damp clothes, she calls after me but I don’t hear, I am already past the chimneys, jumping across to the next building, no one knows my name. One building and then another and another. The air is wavy with heat. There are expanses of soft tar. There are plywood strips to walk on. Loose bricks, stacks of asphalt siding, beer cans, yellowed newspapers. Last spring a boy held me out over the edge of the roof, he wanted to make me cry but I wouldn’t, he wanted to make me beg him but I wouldn’t, and afterward when they let me go and I ran I heard him say, She runs like a deer—which makes me proud. A deer or a light-footed horse or a cheetah. Running springing up into the air. My hair flying, my arms outstretched. You’re dreaming with your eyes open, my mother says. But I’m not asleep. I’m not in bed. It’s daytime and I’m running across the roofs above Main Street, jumping six feet at a stretch, ten feet, twelve, high up into the air, and when I come down it doesn’t hurt my feet, I feel nothing at all, no more than a deer or a horse or a cheetah would, not looking to the left or right.

Once some of us climbed down the fire escape here and went into an opened window into a corridor, but we couldn’t figure out where we were. An old fat woman in a bathrobe chased us back out. You’re the ones, she said, I’m going to call the police, but we climbed back out and ran across the roof laughing. We didn’t take anything. But we were blamed. Irene told my mother. Some kids had stolen somebody’s mail including a check, so we were blamed but it wasn’t our fault, I didn’t even know who had done it. We should burn the building down, I said. The whole damn row of buildings down. See how they like it then.

I am eleven years old, I have stopped growing, the school nurse

says I must bruise easily. What are these marks on the backs of your legs? And I was so ashamed, when the nurse made us all take off our shoes and socks, and my feet weren't clean. Don't cry, one of the girls said. But I wasn't crying.

Clothespoles and television antennae and pigeons, and pigeon droppings all over. Which is why you can't run up here barefoot. That, and the hot tar. The hot asphalt. It makes me dizzy to look over the edge, the girls are always saying, but we're only five floors up, the buildings along Main Street aren't very high, nothing like the Wolcott Building where we played in the elevators: fifteen floors not counting the basements. Is someone calling after me? Is it Momma shouting my name? I am running downstairs now, in the dark. I know which building this is, at the far end of the block, I'll come out on the street between the La Mode Women's Fashions and Dutch Boy Paint & Paper.

Whoa, little horsey! old Mr. Ledbetter says.

Don't you touch me, I whisper. And duck under his arm.

Why did I go all the way out to Waterman Park, they will ask me afterward. Was I crazy, to take the bus three miles alone, to go out *there* by myself. . . . The woman stumbling in the grass, in the high grass along the canal bank, wasn't anyone I knew. I really didn't look. I shut my eyes, I pressed my hands against my ears. She was Momma's age maybe. She had hair the color of Aunt June's—dark brown that looked maroon, like she'd dunked it in purple ink. The red scarf around her neck was one of those filmy chiffon scarfs Irene bought at Woolworth's. You tied them around your neck just for the looks of it. Or around your head if your hair was up in curlers.

Once when they were fighting and Irene was at the roller rink with her boy friend I ran away to my uncle's and aunt's house across town—that was a long time ago, the summer before. My aunt hid me in the bathroom where my little cousins couldn't peek at me. She washed my face, and brushed my hair except for the snarls, and hugged me, and said not to cry. She asked about my father. Wasn't he seeing that doctor any more, wasn't he seeing *any* doctor? She asked about my mother—"Why doesn't she ever give me a call? I miss her"—but I didn't know how to answer. I told her I wanted to live at her house. I wasn't going back home. I made her promise not to telephone my mother and say I

was there.

She let me make popcorn for myself and my little cousins. I melted butter in a tin measuring cup on the stove. But I shook too much salt on the popcorn—I wasn't used to her salt shaker.

She promised not to call my mother but she must have called because my mother and father both came to get me, in a car borrowed from the people who lived next door. I ran to hide under the stairs. I wasn't crying but I was afraid. When they pulled me out I told Aunt June I hated her and wished she was dead. So Momma slapped me. I knew she would slap me. I didn't care, I wasn't crying. I wish I could close my eyes and see Aunt June's face but I can't. I mean, the way she was then. So many years ago. The house on Ingleside Avenue, the red-brick fake siding, my youngest cousin still in diapers. She wasn't as pretty as my mother. But she was pretty. She was just a young woman, wasn't she?—maybe twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. A mole on her cheek, the maroon-gleaming hair in a pageboy, crimson lipstick, her eyebrows penciled in like Elizabeth Taylor's—too heavy and dark for her narrow face. I can't see her now. There isn't any young woman there. I open my eyes and see an angry old woman staring right through me. Her scalp shows through her thin white hair and her eyes are badly bloodshot. She can't talk now because of the throat cancer—because of the operation. She's angry at me because I am still alive. Because I told her I hated her that day, and wished she was dead. But I never meant it. God will forgive me. Unless God is angry too.

I am running inside the store windows, one after another after another. And in the windows of cars parked at the curb. The lady shoppers are annoyed with me but I don't pay any attention to them, I don't even look at them, no one knows my name. The window of the jewelry store, and the window of the discount drug store, and the long wide windows of Woolworth's, a shadow-girl running, weightless, quick as a deer. My father says it's no point in going back to Isle Royale to work for the National Parks Service, it's no point going back to visit my grandparents in the northern peninsula, or looking for a job, or taking up his church work again (after he was discharged from the hospital he'd gone around door-to-door with the Bible for a few months but I don't know all that happened—Momma won't tell us): it's no point going anywhere because

all spots are the same identical spot in God's mind and he was perfectly happy where he was. But I wanted to take the bus out to Waterman Park because I loved it there. Because I was so happy the times we went there.

Except once. But I didn't tell anyone.

That time, at the Jaycees' picnic, Momma and Aunt June took us all out. I won first prize in the ten-to-twelve-year-old foot race, and was given a silver dollar, and a boy named Pat I knew from school, he was in the seventh grade, asked me if he could see it. He said he'd never seen a real silver dollar before. So I showed it to him. Can I hold it? he said. I didn't want to give it to him, I said, Why?—you can see it. No, he said, coming closer, I just want to hold it for a second. I had it in my hand. Come on, he said, let's see, and I didn't want to but I held it up, and he snatched it out of my fingers and ran away behind the refreshment-and-restrooms building with the little tower on top. I cried but didn't tell anyone, not even Irene. I told her I lost the silver dollar. "Then that's double bad luck," she said.

My father says he's proud of his little girl. Proud of both his little girls. But he doesn't want to talk because his head starts to ache and because there isn't anything to say he hasn't said already. Also the light hurts his eyes. Also my voice hurts his ears. "If I had it in me to love anyone I would love you," he says, shaking his cigarette ash in the ashtray, "but you know the Holy Ghost saw fit to depart from me leaving just this husk and whited sepulchre, and I can't lift a finger in rebellion. 'The Spirit bloweth where it will.' Do you know what that means? *That means everything.*"

My mother begins to cry. Short ugly sobs like hiccups. My father turns away as if the sight disgusts him. But he doesn't say anything. He isn't angry. He never gets angry any longer.

"I don't want to taste blood," he says. "Not ever again."

The black bus driver doesn't seem to think it's strange that I have climbed up into the bus by myself, dropped two nickels into the fare box, gone to sit by one of the windows at the rear of the bus. My heart is beating like crazy. There is a queer sensation in the pit of my stomach. To be riding the bus alone! Out to the park alone! But I don't have my bathing

suit. I won't be able to swim in the pool. Two Sundays before, Irene and I went out with a carload of kids, the mother of one of Irene's girl friends drove us out, we swam all afternoon in the pool and had a picnic lunch before coming back home. But now I'm alone. Now I'm going to be alone for the rest of my life.

The seashell ashtray is a souvenir of Tampa, Florida. At its center a miniature mermaid has been fashioned partly out of creamy pink shells, her coiled fish tail glittering prettily, her blue eyes blank and staring. She has seaweed hair that hides her breasts. She is very shapely. But no one admires her any longer, she's been discolored with tobacco, ashes, grime from my father's fingers. No one sees her any longer.

The ashtray sits on my father's chest or abdomen, rising gently, falling. Gradually it becomes filled with ashes and then the ashes are dumped into a wastebasket. I can see my father's crinkly chest hair through his undershirt, curly-red going gray. And under his arms. I can remember how his hair used to grow close about his temples, and in warm weather it would curl damp on his forehead. But now he is going bald. His eyes are a strange pale pebble-color, not blue and not gray, but lighter than his skin. Why is his forehead so creased?—and the cheeks too. He is always thinking. He frowns, makes faces, runs his nicotine-stained forefinger hard across his front teeth. "I don't trust myself out there," he has said. He means out the window, out on the street. Anywhere outside. "I don't want to taste blood ever again."

He smokes Camels. The bed and the floor are littered with cellophane wrappers and those little red cellophane strips. The brand of whisky varies, why can't I remember the labels on the bottles, why are they so much less distinct than the cigarettes . . . ?

Sometimes we play gin rummy for pennies but whoever wins has to put the pennies back in the "kitty"—in a cigar box. Sometimes we play checkers, Parcheesi, or one of the games with dice that Irene is crazy about. The three of us shaking the dice in a little black cardboard cup that got soft and damp from our hands, hooting with laughter, exclaiming, while rain hammered against the window a few feet from the bed, and the air in the room was close and stale and cozy and secret. Only the three of us. My mother never played even when she wasn't at work.

My father had a disability pension but something had gone wrong, or hadn't been completed, so the checks never came. My father and mother quarreled about this but my father explained to Irene and me that it was better to go without than to crawl. "They want to make a man crawl," he said. "But the Spirit of the Lord is infused with too much pride for that." So he lies on top of the bedspread smoking his cigarettes and drinking his whisky, at peace. Sometimes he will flick through the newspaper or something I bring home from school, but mainly he reads the Bible. He reads a verse or a page at a time, then leafs through to another section and reads there, his lips working, his forehead sharply creased. Anything he discovers in the Bible is important. But then it is important too to close the book, and open it again at another place, and read any verse his eye happens upon. It is the most important thing in life. It *is* life. But all the verses are of equal importance.

What is going to happen? Momma's older sister from Trenton asked.

I don't know, Momma said.

I mean—isn't he dangerous? If he was arrested for trying to kill that guy, whoever it was—

That won't happen again, Momma said.

How do you know it won't happen again?

Because it won't.

How do you know, for Christ's sake?

I don't know, Momma said. Go ask him yourself.

He might hurt you or the girls—

Not the girls, Momma said flatly. He's crazy about the girls.

There are a half-dozen scorch marks on the bedspread, a long narrow one on the pillow case. My father says he wasn't asleep but somehow the cigarette slipped from his fingers. He wasn't asleep, the light was on, he'd been studying the Bible. Once at four in the morning he had to beat out a little fire with his hands and he burnt himself so that tears ran down his cheeks from the pain, and my mother screamed at him, screamed and yanked and pulled at the bedclothes, tearing the sheets off the bed, throwing the pillows on the floor. Irene was too frightened to see what was wrong, she just lay there not moving in bed, but I ran out in my nightgown, and there was my mother sobbing and my father with his hands cupped in a strange way, the fingers bent like

claws, trying to comfort *her*. "It wasn't anything," he said. "It was just an accident. Calm down. Calm down. God only meant it as a warning."

At Waterman Park there is sometimes a crippled man who isn't a beggar, a man with funny mottled skin, nothing but stumps for thighs, rolling himself around on a wooden platform with skate wheels attached. He wears gloves so his hands won't be hurt. I never look at him. My eyes dart to him but then lift over his head. Momma says it's rude to stare at a cripple but that isn't why I don't look at him.

This afternoon he's here—pushing himself on his little wooden platform around the wading pool where the small children are splashing and trying to swim. His shoulder and arm muscles are all bunched, his neck is thick as my father's, in spite of the heat he is wearing a felt cap. He pushes himself slowly along the pavement. His movements are precise and rhythmic and unhurried. If you make the mistake of looking into his face you see that one of the eyes is milky and staring off into the air. But the other eye is fixed onto you.

Why did you go out to Waterman Park alone, they will ask. All the way out there alone. You little brat. You liar.

Were you testing God's love for you, my father will ask. But you should know better. You should know that He loves you in any case. You can't injure His love. You can't increase it. You can't even test it.

I am running through the sloshing chlorinated water at the shallow end of the swimming pool, making my way around the other children. I am running barefoot up to my knees in the water, giggling as if someone is chasing me. The skirt of my dress is wet, my underpants are splashed. I want to laugh and shout and scream and kick, pummeling my arms, making a windmill of my arms. I collide with a little girl of six or seven and her head is dunked underwater but it isn't my fault, I keep on running. Someone shouts behind me but I keep on running, waving my arms, squealing as if I am being chased.

I am swinging on one of the swings, kicking myself higher, higher. The sky is empty and very blue. I am stretching my legs as straight as they will go. No one is pushing me. No one calls out to warn me that I am going too high, that I'm being reckless. Suppose I jump off?—and let the swing fly backward?—suppose it strikes the boy swinging beside me? That happened once when I was a little girl. My grandfather was

pushing me then and he scolded me. But now no one is watching, no one knows where I am. I can jump off the swing and let it fly back, I can do anything I want.

My head is ringing, my throat feels very dry. I am climbing up the slide, clambering up like a monkey, clowning around. At the top I am going to jump right off. I've done it before, it isn't dangerous, but the soles of my feet will tingle. I don't want to lose my balance and fall by accident. I feel lightheaded all of a sudden. So I go down the slide the way you're supposed to, pushing myself down, the hot metal makes my skin stick, I hear myself whimpering aloud in pain, it's a mistake to be here, something is going to happen, I am going to be punished. . . . Then I'm safe on the ground again, springing up on my heels. I haven't been burnt. I don't give a damn what happens.

"Moving your hand, see: this is God," my father says, raising his hand slowly in front of his face. "But then—" and here he whips his head around and pretends to be spying on his other hand, halfway behind his back. "—here's God too. All sides. All points. Do you know what that means?" He pauses to look at me. His smile is gentle. "*That means everything.*"

The ice cream cone is melting, chocolate ice cream running down my forearm to my elbow. It's very sweet but hasn't any taste. My throat is aching from all the dust. Suddenly I am angry—suddenly I feel sick to my stomach. I let the ice cream cone drop onto the grass. Something is wrong but I don't know what it is. I don't know how to name it.

I am very excited, but I don't know where to run. I can run and run and run. I'll never get tired or hungry, I can run forever. Jumping into the air, leaping, landing on my toes and springing up again, who will stop me?—who knows where I am? Momma wiped her eyes with her knuckles and pushed past me, she didn't care that I was peeking in on them, she didn't scold. Behind her my father was saying, "I love you, you know that. I love you first last and always." He spoke quietly, he never raises his voice.

Can you fall asleep with your eyes open? I wonder. I have been standing staring at some pigeons picking in the garbage. Five, six, seven of them. Beautiful wings, tail feathers. Pebble-colored eyes. The beaks picking, striking, never making a mistake. But if one pigeon comes too

close to another it's chased away. The pigeons are actually very angry—you wouldn't want them to peck at your outstretched hand. You wouldn't want them to peck at your eyes.

Can you see things when you're awake? I wonder. Like dreams. Like wisps and bits of dreams. But with your eyes open.

There is a snapshot in blurred blazing color of my father and a red fox, taken up at Isle Royale on the lake, when he worked for the government for eight months. My father is wearing a blue nylon Windbreaker and a wool cap, he's squatting, grinning at the camera, and the fox is only a few yards away, his slender snout turned three-quarters toward my father. It looks as if the fox is grinning too. My father is very handsome but the visor of the cap cuts across his eyes making a dark shadow. Whoever took the picture faced the sun too directly, the scene is over-exposed, blazing with light. "Your father had to get away for a while but it doesn't mean he stopped loving us," Momma explained. She explained this to everyone she met.

The program my father was hired for had something to do with charting the movements and patterns of behavior of timber wolves. Whether their population was stable or not. Whether their prey—deer, moose, rabbits—was stable. At first he loved the work because of the solitude, the silence, for weeks on end. Then the work began to sicken him: he had to examine the part-devoured carcasses of animals, he had to take photographs, keep records. He still limped from the accident at the foundry and the cold weather—sometimes it was 30° below zero, not counting the wind-chill—made the injury worse. So he came home. "I never stopped loving you," he said. "Did you stop loving me?"

I can hear the crippled man grunt as he pulls himself along on his wooden platform, but I don't look up. If I don't see him he can't see me. The pigeons are still pecking in the garbage, squabbling over a hot-dog bun. Rushing at one another with their wings outstretched. Is it still the same time, hasn't anything changed?—the sun will never move in the sky.

Dear God I am so afraid of what is going to happen. Dear God forgive me my sins. Help me to be a good girl.

Momma keeps saying: "Things are getting better now, the worst is over."

Momma keeps saying, pouring some whisky for herself while

she's talking on the telephone: "He needs me. He loves me. I love *him*. It isn't the way you think."

A boy of about seventeen is crouched in the rose garden, taking photographs of a bride and her new husband, everyone is smiling, laughing, calling out, maybe they're a little drunk. If I was behind the married couple I could get in the picture but I'm on the wrong side, behind the photographer, peeking through a trellis. There are five middle-aged women in the wedding party, all dressed up, corsages on their shoulders, hats with pretty straw brims, but only three men. No one pays any attention to me. The bride in her long white beautiful dress, with her lace veil hanging down over her back, smiles toward me but doesn't see me. I can roll my eyes and stick out my tongue like I'm choking, it won't make any difference.

I am a snorting horse, a moose with its head lowered, galloping along the path, kicking up gravel. The hell with them staring at me—I don't give a damn. The North Pole is in one direction, the Equator in another, but there isn't anywhere to go that isn't God.

Now I am running along the edge of the park, an angry little heart is beating in the center of my forehead. You aren't supposed to climb down, the signs say Warning, pebbles and rocks and hunks of dried mud are coming loose, you can hurt yourself falling, my hand is scraped and bleeding a little but there isn't much pain, the sensation is mainly numb, the dust will clot the bleeding and make it stop. I am singing at the top of my lungs. Singing and laughing. I will never go back home again: I will live in the park forever.

Did you stop loving me? someone whispers. . . . loving me, loving me?

I am all hooves and wings and flashing antlers. Scaly rippling sides.

Then suddenly I see them: a man and a woman down by the canal: but I've seen them before, those two, on the canal bank in the high grass, and there isn't anything I can do to stop it.

The man is jerking the woman along, his fingers are closed around her bare upper arm. She is already crying. She shouldn't cry, it makes him all the more angry, they don't like tears. I know he's going to kill her but I can't get away. I can't stop it.

His blue coat is slung over his right shoulder, his trousers are streaked with dust. He is wearing a necktie made of some shiny silvery material. His hair is no color at all—trimmed short—standing up stiff and straight as a brush. He has a pig's snout, his face is red and mottled. His voice isn't raised but you can tell he's very angry.

The woman isn't pretty. Her lips are too thick and blubbery. She has a double chin that wobbles as he pulls her along, I can't stand to look at her, hair dyed maroon and teased out around her head like straw, filmy red scarf around her neck, high heels that make her stagger in the grass. She is wearing one of those off-the-shoulder blouses with the elastic neck, they're in Sears' window, Mexican or Spanish they're supposed to be, and a red cotton skirt with a black elastic belt, cinching her waist in tight so that her fat hips bulge, and her fat breasts. When the worst of it begins I am crouched down hiding, my eyes are shut tight and my hands are pressed over my ears. I don't hear her screaming, I don't hear the thuds, the blows. I don't hear a thing.

I hadn't been asleep. But when I opened my eyes I was in the park again, in the rose garden again, crouching behind the trellis. It was still daylight. Maybe no time had passed. Children were still playing in the pool, my head felt very strange but I wasn't bleeding anywhere so maybe everything was all right. The roses were very beautiful, I hadn't looked at them before. The wedding party had gone.

I knew it was later because I was so hungry. The sun had shifted in the sky.

I started crying and couldn't stop.

A woman in yellow shorts came by, another woman joined her, a patrolman, a small staring crowd. My knees had given out and I was sitting on the grass. I was afraid of wetting myself and soiling my underpants but I couldn't stop crying. The woman was lying on her back, her skirt was pulled up, her thick pale lardy flesh exposed. One high-heeled shoe had been twisted off her foot but the strap was still attached to her ankle. I didn't see any blood. I didn't hear anything. The man's necktie had flapped over his shoulder as he ran away but I didn't really see it, I wasn't watching. I was crouched down behind a pile of rocks hiding with my hands pressed against my ears. My heart beat so hard in my chest I knew it was going to burst.

They were asking me what was wrong but I couldn't answer. Was I sick? Had I hurt myself? Had someone hurt me? I couldn't get my breath to answer. Had I fallen off the slide? A woman told the patrolman she had seen me on the playground earlier, I had been acting "strangely." It was her opinion that I was lost. More people drifted by. Children staring. Was I lost? Where were my parents? Were they at the park? What was my name?

I was shivering so hard the policeman took a beach towel from one of the women and wrapped it around me. He said I'd be all right now, nothing bad would happen. But my teeth kept chattering. I couldn't get my breath.

It's hysteria, the policeman said, you see it all the time. He wore sunglasses with very dark green lenses. His voice was kindly, he wasn't scolding.

In the ambulance going to the hospital I did soil my underpants. But nobody said a word about it afterward.

After the accident at the foundry when two men on my father's shift were killed, and my father was hospitalized, the "great silence" came over him more and more often.

He would be lying in bed. Or walking with a cane along the corridor. Or joking with the nurses. Or staring out the window over the parking lot. ("Sometimes it was the way the sunlight flashed on a windshield: simple as that," he says.) There would be a pressure in his ears, and a deafening roar, and then silence. Just—silence.

He couldn't hear anything. He couldn't swallow or blink. Nothing had changed around him but it was all at a distance because he was in God's mind. He could hear God's thoughts, which were identical with his own. "There is the first half of my life," he says, "and then the second. I'm in the second now. I was in it all the time but I didn't know. God had been with me all the time but I didn't know. You think you're alone—that makes you happy when you're a kid—I mean, you can get away with anything, do anything, right? But God is with you all the time. You're not free. Even the thought of it, being free, it's God's thought in your head. Whatever you think or do, God has got there first. So you can't make mistakes. Even the warnings He sends you aren't mistakes."

Sometimes when it snows—when it has been snowing for days

on end, as it has this winter—I stand at the window and hear the silence all around me. I know it will swallow me up someday the way it did my father.

But even this thought—isn't it God's? Of course it is.

In the hospital I started to tell them about the woman by the canal, what the man had done to her, but my words were garbled and I couldn't get my breath. If I closed my eyes I could see her but when I opened them I couldn't remember what I was saying. There was blood on the lower part of her jaw. There was blood, a widening circle of blood, on her blouse.

He had killed her. Then he'd run away. But not light on his feet, not leaping and prancing. He hadn't any hooves or wings. The blood had splashed onto his shirt. I hated them both—they were so ugly.

"You never saw anything," my mother tells me, whispering, leaning over the bed, giving me a secret shake. "You mind your own business!"

Someone was sent out to search by the canal but of course there wasn't any body, there wasn't any evidence of blood or struggle. A single high-heeled shoe was found in the grass.

"She makes things up," my mother says, not looking at me.

Later, after a woman was reported missing, they dragged the canal but never found any body. By then I was back home (I'd only been in the hospital overnight, in the children's ward), by then school had started.

"You just tell them you don't remember," my mother says. "Tell them you don't know. Anyway you made it all up—didn't you?" My father's door has been closed against me for a long time. If I press my ear against it I can hear him singing and humming to himself, sometimes Irene and one of her girl friends are in there with him, playing gin rummy, or shaking the dice until they rattle in the old cardboard cup. The three of them laugh together, I think they must want me to hear. "Anyway you made it up," my mother says, lighting a cigarette, staring at me, "didn't you?"

She has never said anything about the \$3.87 from her bureau drawer. Which means I didn't take it—which means that nothing has happened. But my father's door is closed against me for eleven days. I

am chipping at the plaster in the wall beside my bed with a safety pin,
to mark each day.